

Crash Course in Developing Open-Ended Questions

Adapted from Qualitative Research & Evaluation Methods, Michael Quinn Patton. 2002. Sage Publications, 3rd edition.

Overview of Qualitative Research

The purpose of interviewing is to allow us to enter into another person's perspective. The practice of qualitative research is based upon the following assumptions:

Assumption #1: The perspective of others is meaningful and can be relayed/made explicit.

Assumption #2: Qualitative data is not less or more valuable and meaningful than quantitative.

Other Key Points:

- Evaluators must learn how to listen when knowledgeable people are talking.
- The quality of the information obtained during an interview is largely dependent on the interviewer—"the art of hearing."
- Skills and technique can enhance the quality of interview data—"no less important is a **genuine interest in and caring about the perspectives of other people.**"

Developing Open-Ended Questions

A. Question Type

There are an infinite number of ways to ask a question! Before diving in and drafting questions, take time to consider what it is you want to know about the participant or problem. The following question types collect vastly different types of information and should be considered when designing your interview questions.

1. Experience and Behavior—what a person does or has done; "If I had followed you through a typical day on the job, what would I see you doing?"
2. Opinion and Values—what people think about a topic/experience. Tell us about peoples intentions, desires, aspirations, goals; "What do you think about _____?"
3. Feeling—different from opinion, an interviewer is exploring emotional responses to an event, experience or issue. (e.g. anxious, happy, afraid,
4. Knowledge—gauge a participant's factual information.
5. Sensory—Ask about what is seen, heard, touched, tasted and smelled. "Tell me what I would see if I was to walk through the streets of your community?"
6. Background/demographic—Age, occupation, education.

B. Time Frame

Is your question grounded in the past, present or future? Questions about the present tend to be easier for respondents than questions about the past. Future-oriented questions require speculation, and are less reliable than questions about the past or present.

C. Wording

How a question is phrased and asked influences the response. **Asking questions is an art.** With that in mind, questions must be truly open-ended. Questions should leave the response up to the respondent's imagination; it should allow the respondent to go in any direction they want and use whatever words they want when replying.

When developing questions, we have a tendency to include a qualifier, such as "How satisfied were you with your experience at our training?" This could limit the respondent to expressing satisfaction only, when what we wanted out of the question was their opinion of the training or how it made them feel. An alternative: "What is your opinion of the training provided to you by Liz, Bridget, Becky and Dan?"

Develop questions to evoke an infinite response. Our instinct is to ask dichotomous questions, "Did you have a good weekend? Did you get to go for a run before work?" Dichotomous questions can feel more like an interrogation than a conversation. This is as applicable to qualitative research as it is simple relationship-building. Deepen your understanding of your coalition members, colleagues and people whom you've met for the first time by asking questions that invite response.

D. Singularity

Stick to a single idea when developing a question. Think about the following question: "How challenging is the course for you and how well does the professor support your learning?" Or, think about what the reaction might be if you asked the following series of questions at the start of an interview: "I am here today to ask your opinion about your graduate course—what you think the strengths and weaknesses are of the course. What you think could be improved, and what should stay the same. Those types of opinions, and any others you might have."

Bundling questions into one question and asking multiple questions at once can create confusion and tension. You are asking the respondent to take on a big role—of remembering all components of the question and provide a genuine, authentic response. Essentially, you are giving them more work and taking the easy road. Make it easy for your participant. Break up those complicated questions! Have a specific question focus in mind and keep it to that single focus. By keeping "singularity" in mind, it is clear to the participant "what/who/how" you are asking about.

E. Clarity

Clarity goes a long way in making your interviewees comfortable, and improves the quality of data you are able to collect. While singularity is an essential component of making things clear, other factors can contribute to clarity. Paying attention to different cultures and "frames of reference" will result in clarity. A few tips to improve clarity....

- Be aware of the culture of the people of whom you are asking questions, including their awareness of certain terms, structures and constructs. This includes phrases or categories used, language used or preferred (e.g. young people vs. teens), or avoid using labels altogether.
- Additionally, consider the "frame of reference" of the person being interviewed. What is their day-to-day like? How have their experiences shaped their perspective? Considering a person's "frame" is essential in ensuring the question is understood and resonant.

F. Neutrality

During an interview, it's natural to want to build rapport. When I interview, I want to be perceived as trustworthy and likeable, to make the participant feel comfortable to open up and share information. However, the line between rapport and neutrality is fuzzy, and one can quickly undermine the other. When engaging in the interview process with a community member or someone who you would like to recruit for your coalition, it is tempting to use the opportunity to build rapport. Consider how being a neutral listener might result in different and potentially more candid information. Be clear with yourself about your intentions for the interview.